Review of The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature ed. by Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney

The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature ed. by Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney (re

Robert Irvine

Scottish Literary Review, Volume 5, Number 2, Autumn/Winter 2013, pp. 99-102 (Review)

Published by Association for Scottish Literary Studies

The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature. **Edited by Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN 9780521189361. 341pp. £24.99.**

The essays contained in this volume provide a broad overview of Scottish literary writing from the earliest times to the present day. It represents an invaluable resource for anyone beginning their exploration of a particular period, author, or genre; but with contributions from many of the leading scholars in their respective fields, it will also reward the more knowledgeable reader with fresh insights and new perspectives.

Among the most thought-provoking essays in this collection is the first, Thomas Clancy's on 'Scottish Literature before Scottish Literature'. By effectively placing the origins of Scottish Literature (as this volume understands it) before any identifiable 'national tradition' in Gaelic, Scots or English, Clancy does more than allow for the inclusion of writing in Old Welsh, Old English, Old French, Norse and Latin in the Scottish canon; he also draws attention to the inevitable arbitrariness of what, from the writing of the succeeding centuries, we include in and exclude from that canon. This expansiveness of scope and suspension of question-begging definitions of what counts as 'Scottish' is vindicated in the essays which follow Clancy's. Most of those which cover pre-twentieth-century topics provide the reader with a thorough grounding in the literary history of a particular period (Alessandra Petrina on the Middle Ages; Sarah Dunnigan on the Reformation and Renaissance; Leith Davis on the eighteenth century before Burns; Andrew Nash on the Victorians), or an introduction to the work of a particular writer (Nigel Leask on Burns, Ian Duncan on Scott, Penny Fielding on Stevenson). Peter Mackay's survey of the Gaelic tradition is particularly useful, demonstrating how thoroughly Gaelic writing participated in the developments chronicled in the other essays.

Twentieth-century and contemporary writing present greater challenges of perspective and categorisation. Robert Ellis Hosmer provides a comprehensive account of Muriel Spark's career in fiction, albeit concentrating on the moral and theological content of the novels at the expense of attention to the extraordinary formal technique which surely justifies Spark's getting a chapter to herself. Otherwise, twentieth-century fiction is covered under three separate headings. David Goldie's survey of popular fiction deploys fine formal and political discrimination, while McIlvanney's essay on 'The

Glasgow Novel' traces the representation of Scotland's metropolis from Defoe to the present day, an approach which also allows the inclusion of the commercially successful alongside the canonically literary, and reaps similarly rich rewards. The story Cairns Craig tells about the politics of Scottish fiction since 1979 remains one with which any student of modern Scotland needs to engage, and it is given succinct and stimulating articulation here in 'Devolution and the Scottish Novel'. The price paid for this division of labour is that, while he features in both the McIlvanney and Craig essays, James Kelman does not get the extended consideration that his importance perhaps merits: he must have been a candidate for a stand-alone essay such as that afforded Spark. On the other hand, Scott Lyall's use of the career of Hugh MacDiarmid to introduce the other significant writers of the 'Scottish Renaissance' of the 1920s and 30s has the useful effect of avoiding any simple endorsement of MacDiarmid's view of his own centrality. Gerard Carruthers rounds off the volume with a fascinating introduction to the literature of the Scottish colonial diaspora.

Craig aside, the essays which advance a thesis, instead of surveying a field, are the least rewarding in this collection. Fiona Stafford's topic, modern Scottish poetry, defies the imposition of a unifying angle. That Scottish poets, from Morgan on, stopped worrying about the 'language question' that had so vexed MacDiarmid's generation, provides her with a plausible starting-point. But Stafford attempts to give this negative characterisation a positive content by linking it to the end of the Cold War: 'Power relations no longer seemed to involve the inevitable oppression of minorities, while increasing awareness of international diversity and voluntary economic union encouraged a more flexible understanding of national cultures' (234). This will not match everyone's memories of the 1990s, though it perhaps recalls the Blairite commitment to both 'multiculturalism' and economic globalisation from the end of that decade. It does not provide a rationale for the narrow selection of poets introduced here. It is no doubt a good thing that Mick Imlah, an 'Oxford-educated, London-based *TLS* editor' (244) can be counted as a modern Scottish poet, but it is a very odd perspective that can celebrate this as evidence of a 'collapse of global binaries' (234).

Murray Pittock's contribution is entitled 'Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Scottish Canon: Cosmopolites or Narrow Nationalists?' which seems to be biting off more than a companion essay could possibly chew.

In fact Pittock's essay nowhere addresses canonicity, or explains what the Enlightenment understood by 'cosmopolitan', and 'nationalism' is introduced only as the brain-child of Herder (the aftermath of the French Revolution is not mentioned). Pittock's general drift is probably correct: that the Scottish Enlightenment is not 'Romanticism's antithesis', not only because an antithesis has to come after its thesis rather than before, but because 'the Enlightenment and Romanticism are inextricably intertwined in Scottish Romanticism' (91). Indeed, to the extent that this essay reveals everything that might be called 'Romantic' to be already there in 'Enlightenment' literary practice, it points towards the redundancy of the category 'Romanticism' in the Scottish context altogether, except as a periodisation. Pittock, however, remains invested in an opposition towards whose deconstruction he begins by gesturing. His closing account of Scott's *Rob Roy* is more coherent than the discussion which precedes it, but it opposes Enlightenment and Romantic values (97) in a simple way uninformed by that discussion.

Towards the end of Matthew Wickman's essay on 'The Emergence of Scottish Studies' we find the following intriguing formulation: 'the field of Scottish Studies constitutes a kind of revenge against the presumptions of its own recovery, its own "rise"' (257). I take this to refer to the awareness among current practitioners that the institutionalised study of Scottish literature originated in ideas about essential cultural differences between races and nations, and that part of the work of Scottish literary studies now is to guard against these essentialist assumptions by remaining conscious of the constructed, historically-contingent status of the categories we work within, such as 'Scottish' (and also 'culture' and 'literature'). But Wickman's essay takes a perplexing and under-evidenced route to get to this conclusion, insisting on the importance of 'British Cultural Studies' as a model for 'Scottish Studies', this being 'one reason why scholars employ the term Scottish *Studies*' (251). Yet it is not obvious that the term enjoys this sort of privilege. Devolution, Wickman asserts, fostered, among other developments, new journals, 'most pertinently, at least in name, the *Scottish Studies Review* in 2000' (251); readers of this article will be aware that *SSR*, which merged *Scotlands* and *Scottish Literary Journal*, became *Scottish Literary Review* in 2009. The disciplinary self-reflection of Wickman's essay might have been more efficiently incorporated in the editors' introduction; the space made available could have accommodated an essay on Scottish drama, the

only regrettable omission from this handsome and otherwise comprehensive volume.

Robert Irvine
University of Edinburgh